

# Making Sense of Critical Pedagogy in L2 Education Through a Collaborative Study Group

Dándole sentido a la pedagogía crítica en la educación en L2 a través de un grupo de estudio colaborativo

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In this article we discuss our experiences in the process of understanding critical pedagogy within an English teachers' study group which was created for the purpose of learning how to teach language from a critical perspective. We particularly focus on the challenges of meaning making around critical pedagogy, as we realized that we were not all able to similarly enter this discourse. To illustrate our processes of understanding theory individually and collectively, some of the group members' narratives are used as examples of our different perspectives. We argue that making sense of critical pedagogy, as part of a process of professional development, implies spaces and situations of personal confrontation with theory and support in collaborative learning through dialogue.

*Key words:* Critical pedagogy, study group, teacher development, teacher education, teacher learning.

Presentamos nuestras experiencias del proceso de comprender la pedagogía crítica por parte de un grupo de profesores de inglés, que fue creado con el propósito de aprender cómo se puede enseñar la lengua desde una perspectiva crítica, en diferentes contextos en Medellín. Nos enfocamos particularmente en los desafíos que implica construir significado sobre la pedagogía crítica cuando no todas las integrantes podían acceder a este discurso de la misma manera. Para ilustrar nuestro proceso de comprensión individual y grupal de la teoría, utilizamos las narrativas de algunas integrantes del grupo como ejemplos de nuestras diversas perspectivas. Planteamos que darle sentido a la pedagogía crítica como parte de un proceso de desarrollo profesional implica espacios y situaciones de confrontación personal con la teoría, así como apoyo en el aprendizaje colaborativo a través del diálogo.

*Palabras clave:* aprendizaje del maestro, formación de maestros, grupo de estudio, pedagogía crítica.

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How to cite this article (APA, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.): Echeverri Sucerquia, P. A., & Pérez Restrepo, S. (2014). Making sense of critical pedagogy in L2 education through a collaborative study group. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 16(2), 171-184. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile.v16n2.38633>.

This article was received on July 1, 2013, and accepted on January 15, 2014.

## Introduction

In recent years the Colombian government has focused its attention on the promotion of bilingual education as a strategy to respond to the demands of global markets and to support economic development. In this endeavor, several initiatives have been undertaken at the national and local levels, including the use of imported standards like the Common European Framework of Reference as guidelines to measure language proficiency and to design curricula; in addition, there has been a greater investment in the revision of the quality of teacher education programs and the creation of professional development programs for in-service teachers.

With the increasing interest in Colombia to promote bilingual education, the use of relevant language pedagogies that value local identities is at stake: Market driven educational goals, along with imported language proficiency standards, contrast with a context where social inequalities, violence, and poverty abound and with the lack of teacher preparation to help students achieve international standards. Aware of these issues and willing to find pathways to counteract them in our pedagogical practices, the coordinators of two English programs<sup>1</sup> in Colombia decided to invite teachers in their programs to create a study group in January, 2011.

A variety of practicing teachers joined the group: undergraduate students in a foreign language teacher education program, students in a foreign language Master's program, some recently graduated teachers, and a few teacher educators. The group started with 12 members of which six remain to this day. One of the reasons that brought us together as a study group was the need of finding alternative pedagogies that would help

us reconfigure second or foreign language (L2) education in the Colombian context and under our particular socioeconomic and cultural conditions. This was especially important to us given that most literature in our field has been produced abroad and that our educational system does not seem to prioritize locally-constructed knowledge. Critical pedagogy was the orientation we chose as an initial point of departure in aiming at a pedagogy that strives for particularity ("embedded in a particular social milieu"), practicality (that "aims for a teacher-generated theory of practice"), and possibility ("that empowers participants" [Kumaravadivelu, 2001, pp. 538-544]).

Of all our experiences in the study group,<sup>2</sup> we particularly focus in this article on our first challenge: The process of making sense of critical pedagogy as we realized that we were not all able to similarly enter this discourse—its language, concepts, principles, and so forth. This happened due to several reasons, including our differing levels of familiarity with critical pedagogy and difficulty of understanding critical pedagogy discourses, often characterized as abstract and complex. Furthermore, we struggled at implementing the idealistic vision of critical scholars in the realities of our educational settings.

In the process of meaning making around critical pedagogy, we refer to the effects of individual confrontation with the theory as well as collective meaning making as a learning community. To illustrate this process, we present and discuss the narratives<sup>3</sup> of four of the group members<sup>4</sup> as a way

<sup>1</sup> An English program for teenagers and a Teacher Education program in Foreign Languages.

<sup>2</sup> As part of our experience in the study group, we conducted a case study research project with the purpose of exploring our experiences of professional development. In this piece we concentrate on one of the salient themes we identified. The overall results of this research are reported in a different article.

<sup>3</sup> We prepared these narratives for a presentation at the American Educational Studies Association (AESA) annual meeting in 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Although four of us initially prepared our narratives for the presentation at the conference, only two of us engaged in the writing of this article (with the other authors' consent).

to privilege the teacher voice as we describe our experiences. We focus on these narratives because they illustrate the differences in the nature of such experiences given our diverse academic and teaching backgrounds; moreover, doing this privileges our voices as relevant sources to construct theory about our practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

A focus on individual narratives about professional development experiences aligns with our effort in the study group to “create a democratic setting,” where all our voices are valued and all participants are “in control of deciding what knowledge about their practice they want to access and how” (Saavedra as cited in Anderson & Saavedra, 1995, pp. 230-231). This similarly reflects the importance we gave in the study group to our personal histories, which we used to understand and interpret ideas and practices so that we could eventually assist one another in mutual transformation through dialogue.

We begin this piece by providing some information about the study group, including the reasons why we decided to study critical pedagogy and a description of the methodology we used as part of the learning process. We briefly describe who the authors of the selected narratives are, followed by a discussion and exemplification of themes that we identified in relation to the issue of developing an understanding of critical pedagogy. We finish with some arguments to support why gaining conceptual clarity and understanding of theory are fundamental in teacher development to increase self-awareness and reflexivity so that eventually we arrive at better informed pedagogical practices. We intend to contribute to the literature on critical language teacher development, particularly concerning the process of understanding, appropriating, and/or interrogating theory.

## **Why a Study Group on Critical Pedagogy in L2 Education**

In this section we will offer some theoretical background to justify our focus on critical pedagogy in relation to second and foreign language education. We start by identifying two broad orientations in language education that have also permeated language teacher education: an instrumentalist orientation and a critical orientation. Then we refer to the relevance of a critical orientation in language education in the Colombian context and its implications for teacher professional development.

### **An Instrumentalist vs. a Critical Orientation in L2 Education and L2 Teacher Education**

Renowned authors in the field of L2 teaching like Pennycook (1990) and Crookes (2009) have argued that there is a gap between the field of language education and educational theory at large. Pennycook (1990) explains that language education has largely been influenced by linguistics and psycholinguistics and this has resulted in a positivist and instrumentalist orientation towards language and knowledge in general (Pennycook, 1990, 2004). A characteristic of this orientation is the marked focus on the teaching of language structures and communicative functions that have little to do with students' lives outside the classroom.

This instrumentalist orientation, often called “technical” and “practical” as well, has similarly affected L2 teacher education. Crookes (2009) argues that most teacher education programs have focused on “the preparation of technicians who deliver language instruction with no other major concerns” (p. 46). In contrast to an instrumentalist view approach to teacher education, authors like Osborn (2000) and Crookes (2009) point out that along with a focus on language and language

instruction, teachers need to become aware of their own views and values concerning language teaching and to understand and explain their role as language teachers in their particular society. This perspective is often called a “critical” orientation in language teacher education; this orientation draws attention to the importance of theory to interpret teaching practice and understand the local social realities in connection to larger social issues (Leistyna, Lavandez, & Nelson, 2004). Such understanding may not only give the teacher elements for a social critique, but also facilitate awareness of the self and the world necessary to problematize teaching practice—for example, by generating questions about the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that shape our pedagogical practices.

The field of L2 teacher professional development and teacher education in Colombia is not devoid of tension between an instrumentalist and a socially-relevant, more critical orientation. For example, in her study about models currently used in professional development programs in Colombia, González (2007) found that the most popular model, the ICALT,

considers teachers mainly as instructors. Their needs as learners are reduced to the language improvement component. It ignores important aspects that they see as priorities in their daily work such as school violence, early pregnancies, anorexia and bulimia, and lack of hope for the future. (pp. 320-321)

Within this model teachers seem to be regarded as mere deliverers of content that is not related to students’ lives, as trainers in skills that do not necessarily help students cope with issues they face every day.

Similarly, in her study about current approaches used in foreign language teacher education programs in Colombia, Cárdenas (2009) found that transmission and skills-based models still persist. However, there seems to be a growing tendency

among foreign language teacher education programs in Colombia for more socially relevant models, like the social-constructivist, which is a critical approach that places a greater focus on the social and on the teacher’s holistic development. She explains that programs within this perspective focus on “giving prospective teachers the chance to develop their own teaching style . . . taking into account the particularities of their contexts and the parameters provided to teachers” (p. 101). This approach coincides with a critical orientation to teacher education in that it pays greater attention to local contexts and their needs.

The language teachers and language teacher educators who are part of this study group identify this instrumentalist versus critical tension in our practice too. We often find that the educational system where we work often privileges an instrumentalist notion of language education while disregarding students’ local context. In a country like Colombia, where signs of oppression and injustice are so evident, we believe that English teachers here will be doing their students a disservice if they limit themselves to teaching grammar structures and communicative functions that are not related to students’ real lives.

In our search we learned that in order to advance a critical agenda as language teachers, we needed to first “develop political and ideological clarity in order to increase the chances of academic success for all students” (Bartolomé, 2004, p. 98) and also develop “conceptual understanding of practice” (Crookes, 2009, p. 113). Such clarity and conceptual understanding may lead to awareness of the self—ideas, beliefs, practices, attitudes, and so forth—and awareness of the world while connecting the particular with the global, that is, understanding social realities in connection to current structural issues like systemic gender violence, unemployment, domestic violence, and so forth.

Likewise, this awareness of the self and the world is necessary so that teachers are better able to problematize their practice.

In conclusion, teachers in this study group identify with a critical perspective because we believe that as educators we cannot just focus on the teaching of language structures and remain indifferent to the social realities of our students. The following are some of the most important characteristics of the *critical* language teacher development<sup>5</sup> we strived for in the study group:

- Rejects the notion of teachers as content deliverers, as implied in an instrumentalist/technical orientation to language education and L2 teacher education.
- Privileges local context and teacher practice to imagine new possibilities and produce locally situated knowledge.
- Entails helping teachers to develop the conceptual, political, and ideological clarity necessary to understand and transform practice.
- Focuses on theory that enables teachers to develop self-awareness, to critically read the world, and problematize their practice.

Because we intended to avoid simply regurgitating theory, but understand it rather and critically appropriate it and/or interrogate it, it was necessary to develop conceptual clarity; this task became our initial goal as a learning community. In the following section we will refer to the strategies we used to achieve conceptual and theoretical clarity of critical pedagogy.

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5 Even though we acknowledge the differences between teacher education and teacher development literatures, we use both as referents for two reasons. One, in the critical realm these literatures do not differ ostensibly (as far as theoretical principles are concerned), and two, our study group includes both pre-service and in-service teachers, making both literatures equally relevant to our experience. Consequently, when a generic term may be used, we selected "teacher development."

## The Study Group

The coordinators of two programs (an English program for teenagers and an undergraduate program in Foreign Language Teaching) initially organized this study group in January, 2011. The group was comprised of seven members who all had different levels of teaching experience and different entry points as regards critical pedagogy literature. There were three undergraduate students and two graduate students (from the Bachelor's and Master's program in Foreign Language Teaching) who had already been teaching English in programs for children, youth, and adults, and two professors who had been teaching in the same undergraduate program; one is the study group leader and thesis advisor for the graduate students and the other one is the practicum advisor for one of the undergraduate students.

We met for two or four hours every week to discuss readings we had previously selected collaboratively. At the beginning, we discussed our concerns and needs, and then we made decisions about expectations, methodology, and topics to be addressed in the study group. We started with reading texts about critical theory and critical pedagogy. Given that the language in the texts was new and difficult to understand for most of the group members, we used a wide variety of activities to foster comprehension of the texts and the theory, including drawing sketches to interpret and visualize abstract concepts, elaborating mind maps of the more theoretical readings, developing discussion questions, preparing reading reports, and negotiating meaning through dialogue with peers.

In addition to these comprehension strategies, we used other strategies to encourage self-reflection such as designing and completing self and peer-evaluation reports and transcribing our own interventions in some meetings.<sup>6</sup> Another activ-

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6 As part of the data collection process for our study, we audio

ity we did that became an important strategy for self-reflection and comprehension/appropriation of theory was preparing presentations for national and international events. Writing up our scripts for these events pushed group members to use theory to explain perspectives on language education and processes of professional growth.

For one of these events, some of the group members prepared narratives to be presented during a symposium at an international conference. Of the several themes that emerged from our study (which we report on in a separate article), we decided to address in this presentation the process by which we tried to make sense of critical pedagogy. As mentioned earlier in this paper, we selected this theme because it constituted our first challenge as learners of critical pedagogy, so we decided to use our individual narratives to illustrate the process.

The ones who engaged in the preparation and presentation of this symposium were four of us: Patricia,<sup>7</sup> the study group leader; Diana, a professor/practicum advisor; Nadia, an undergraduate student in her senior year doing her practicum, and Santiago, an undergraduate student in the middle of the program. Patricia is one of the study group's founders and the leader. She has been a teacher educator for over ten years. Because she was the most knowledgeable in the group about critical pedagogy, she often played the role of a facilitator. When she became acquainted with Freirean pedagogy and critical pedagogy, she became aware of the relevance of a critical approach in language education that was responsive to the needs of the complex Colombian context. Diana, another teacher educator with 15 years of experience as an English teacher, has

an interdisciplinary background—language teaching, special education, and Latin American studies. As a tutor at an extension program and practicum advisor at a teaching program, Diana became concerned with how to reorient her teaching towards a more critical stance in her teaching practices.

In spite of being an undergraduate student, Nadia already had enough English teaching experience with children to convince herself that she needed better strategies to have a greater impact on her students' lives. She did her practicum while still taking part in the study group. Her reflections along this time period showed her growing concern on becoming a language teacher who was able to go beyond just teaching the target language in her classes. As for Santiago, he pursued the last third of the same teaching program's core subjects during 2012. Past experiences as a journalism major awakened in him the need to address, as an English teacher, his students' social realities. These realities often remain invisible in school curricula.

The authors of this article revisited the narratives we discussed in our presentation at the conference. We selected and analyzed those excerpts that, in our opinion, depicted the experiences of making sense of critical pedagogy. We briefly discuss these narratives in light of the theory we read concerning language teacher education and learning.

### **Making Sense of Critical Pedagogy in the Study Group**

As we previously explained, making sense of critical pedagogy theory was an important issue for us due to our differing levels of familiarity with critical pedagogy, the abstract character of critical pedagogy language, core concepts and principles, and the lack of concrete examples in many critical pedagogy texts. We organized the selected narratives into two main themes; each theme refers to two differentiated though interdependent stages in

recorded some of the meetings (for example, those where we discussed our own and peer evaluations) and later, we identified and transcribed our own interventions in the meeting. This strategy proved to be a very useful activity to foster self-awareness.

<sup>7</sup> The names provided here are pseudonyms.



the process of making sense of critical pedagogy. The first one is related to understanding theory at an individual level (i.e., when preparing the readings for meetings or making sense of the theory read and discussed after the meetings, etc.); and the second one relates to how we made sense of theory in our interactions in the group, particularly as we negotiated relationships of power so that they did not constrain our process of understanding theory.

### Trying to Understand Critical Pedagogy Concepts and Theoretical Principles Individually

During our initial meetings, the study group leader provided some guiding questions to facilitate the reading process, given that the texts were dense, full of unfamiliar concepts and a great amount of information. This situation often resulted in members feeling confused and frustrated. Making sure that we understood the language, concepts, and ideas in texts about critical pedagogy was important because this would facilitate the connections we made between theory and practice and because it would also allow for greater participation from everyone in group discussions.

Under the guidance of the group leader, we negotiated different comprehension strategies to tackle the readings individually. The challenges of meaning-making were different for each of us—it was either developing concepts, understanding abstract ideas, or contextualizing theory, depending on how familiar we were with critical theory at large or on our expertise as language teachers. The following excerpts from the narratives we selected show the differences in our perspectives concerning the strategies we used to achieve a better understanding of theory and greater conceptual clarity at an individual level.

**Nadia:** The challenge of developing abstract concepts. Prior to my participation in the study group I was not familiar with

critical pedagogy theory and was not fond of any other particular theory. For this reason, my decisions as an English teacher were mostly based on experience. The strategies we used in the study group helped me comprehend, internalize, and incorporate new concepts in my discourse while contributing to my making sense of the foundations of critical theory.

For example, mind mapping was a strategy that helped me understand concepts and establish relationships between them; however, this was a difficult task because I had the tendency to focus on my experiences alone, and most of the texts were theoretical, without practical examples; just abstract concepts and ideas. My confusion was reflected at meetings as I had nothing to question in the texts. I committed to read more carefully, but I struggled with my old assumption that talking about practices was more important than theorizing about them. Confronting the theory with my reality was a chance for making my reading a more conscientious activity.

In this excerpt we can see how Nadia, a student teacher at the time she participated in the study group, initially struggled with theory and therefore decided to resort to her own experiences to support her understanding. Given that she had about two years of teaching experience (at the time of writing her narratives), she felt comfortable using it as a reference to make sense of theory; likewise, she recognized the importance of understanding the abstract ideas presented in texts so that she would be able to theorize about her practice. In the following excerpt we can see how Santiago, another pre-service teacher, dealt with making sense of theory on his own in a very different way.

**Santiago:** From a personal to a shared understanding of theory.

When reading texts on critical pedagogy, I took advantage of intratextual analysis; that is, trying to first grasp the correlations the author established between concepts in order to understand how they configure his/her stance. I find this intratextual reading a compelling step before doing an intertextual reading; by this I mean enriching my initial analysis of a text with additional readings and interpretations of similar topics by other authors or group peers.

But understanding the theory on my own was not enough. I found that the informed discussions with my group peers were essential because they allowed me to see how clear a concept is to me, since I often had to reformulate my ideas in a way my group colleagues would understand. This attitude helped me gain deeper understanding because I was better able to give context to my theoretical constructions.

From the very moment Santiago joined our study group, he showed great confidence when tackling theoretical texts that seemed to be difficult to the other participants. In the group, we attributed his skill of understanding difficult concepts to the fact that Santiago was an avid reader and that he was familiar with discourses in various social sciences. However, unlike Nadia, Santiago had little teaching experience and therefore, he felt less confident, relying on experience to understand theory; still, he found it was important to give context to the concepts in the texts to reassure his comprehension of theory.

In contrast with the previous excerpts from narratives, the following ones depict the experience of the two teacher educators in the group in their efforts to either understand or facilitate understanding of theory.

**Diana: Testing my understanding of critical pedagogy while mentoring a student teaching project.** As a personal strategy, I try to connect what I read with my reality. Nevertheless, this strategy was put to the test when I had to supervise a practicum student who is also a member of this study group. Influenced by her participation in the group, she planned an action research project intended to promote a democratic environment and to raise awareness about social issues. Guiding her in the development of this project was a challenge because I was used to supervising projects dealing with the improvement of language skills alone.

In this experience I faced two limitations. First of all, when looking at the critical pedagogy literature, I found that what had been written elsewhere does not always fit into what we live in

the Colombian setting; a context where the social and economic differences are so highlighted. The second challenge was to guide such research project with my limited understanding of critical pedagogy. Only after 10 months of working on the project with the student teacher, I, we, finally got a clearer understanding of the issue she wanted to address. This entailed reconstructing the original project but with the satisfaction of having gained greater conceptual clarity.

Like Nadia, Diana was better able to make sense of theory as she made connections with her pedagogical practice. Supervising a practicum project based on critical pedagogy principles challenged her to test her understanding of theory and to give context to the literature produced elsewhere. This experience defied her confidence for some time, but it provided her with new learning opportunities, as she discussed in the group on several opportunities.

In the following excerpt Patricia refers to a different challenge she faced as the group leader.

**Patricia: The challenge of supporting the process of making sense of critical pedagogy.** As the study group leader, I found myself with the great responsibility of facilitating understanding of theory. Even though the study group participants identified with the goals of critical pedagogy, it was difficult for them to understand the texts, which I could notice in some of their interventions; some of them recognized that this happened as a result of their lack of familiarity with critical pedagogy discourse or lack of rigor in the process of reading. Likewise, it was challenging for me to negotiate strategies that actually helped everyone to better understand the readings while being careful not to provide all explanations myself or to impose my own ideas about critical pedagogy.

My purpose as the study group leader was to foster the teachers' construction of knowledge about critical pedagogy through a process of progressive scaffolding of theory. I strived for individual comprehension of the readings before moving into a negotiation and construction of meaning in our interactions with colleagues in the group, hoping that this would lead us to informed self-reflection and self-knowledge.



In contrast with the other three narratives, Patricia's excerpt exposes the challenge of promoting understanding of theory without imposing her own views, while at the same time fostering a progressive and collaborative learning process. Her own challenge became the group challenge as we strived for becoming more confident about our individual—and then group constructions—rather than solely on her knowledge and leadership.

The previous narratives reveal similarities and differences in the ways we approached critical pedagogy. For all of us the strategies we used individually to understand (or facilitate understanding of) theory were successful in helping us start grasping the theory as presented by experts, at least to the point of gaining greater clarity before participating in group discussions. In the study group it was often mentioned that the reading activities pushed us to be more rigorous in our readings, though we recognized that better comprehension was achieved once we related the readings to our experiences (as Diana commented in her narrative) and as we shared our understandings in the group (as explained by Santiago in his narrative).

Exploring the unknown made us feel vulnerable and uncomfortable at different levels, both in the case of pre-service teachers as well as the most experienced teachers, which resulted in particular ways of dealing with these feelings. For example, while Nadia (who expressed not being fond of a particular theory) resorted to focusing on practice and not on theory as presented by the authors, Santiago (a student who was more used to reading complex texts in philosophy and psychology) initially limited himself to understanding the authors' point independently from his experience. Resorting to what they were familiar with increased their confidence in their process of making sense of theory.

Dealing with these individual struggles in understanding critical pedagogy was not an easy

task, so we always found ourselves reaching out to colleagues for support and collaborative learning, as suggested in some of the narratives. Given the feelings of vulnerability, establishing an environment of trust was of utmost importance; this entailed an attitude of solidarity (putting oneself in someone else's position to understand her/his point of view) and open-mindedness (to realize that there are multiple ways to understand an issue). In a similar experience of collaborative learning related by Luna et al. (2004), they call this process developing "critically supportive relationships" (p. 75) through which group participants co-construct knowledge. We refer to this stage in the process of meaning making in the following section and discuss the influence of power relationships in the dynamics of collaborative learning.

### Making Sense of Theory Through Our Interactions in the Study Group

Trying to understand the readings through individual comprehension activities was not enough to internalize the new knowledge, as explained by Santiago in his narrative excerpt. It was necessary to share and compare our individual understandings with group colleagues in order to collaboratively make sense of theory and our individual experiences. In both individual and group efforts to understand theory, our different levels of experience, expertise, ability to understand abstract concepts, and knowledge of the topic influenced our ability to understand critical pedagogy, either positively or negatively. The following set of narratives gives an account of how the statuses we created based on such differences generated certain dynamics of power in the group thus creating or hindering possibilities to co-construct knowledge about the topic.

Diana: Those who know vs. those who don't know. Diversity and power within the study group were initially defined by our

educational level (undergraduate, graduate), roles within the group (coordinator, co-researchers, student-researchers), as well as ability to understand theory. Likewise, these characteristics influenced the kind of relationships we established among us. For example, I perceived situations where someone in the group may think that “because s/he understands theory better, s/he knows more than me, and therefore what I say is not relevant, so I better don’t say what I think.”

This situation reminds me of the analogy that Skutnabb-Kangas (as cited in Wink, 2000, p. 89) mentions when she refers to power relations. She explains that most of the time we play in an A team or a B team. I, for instance, feel I am in the A team when I understand easily what we read and then I feel comfortable. But at other times I am in the position of those who don’t understand, the B team, and therefore I feel uncomfortable because I think I have less power of incidence and intellectual contribution and therefore, it affects my self-esteem. I don’t think the study group members are intentionally playing in one team or the other; unfortunately, we are so accustomed to being in one team or the other that we are not aware of this situation.

In this excerpt Diana brings about a situation in the group that affected our learning: the power dynamics that we established. She explains how, depending on how empowered or disempowered we felt in comparison to others in the group, our motivation influenced our participation in discussions and activities, which either constrained or facilitated our learning. However, as illustrated in the following narratives, we used critical pedagogy to counter the power dynamics that were so embedded in our experience of collaborative learning.

**Santiago: Interdependence to build understanding.** In my interventions I strived for maintaining the authors’ level of abstraction in the texts and I found that this fact prevented some of my peers from participating. In other words, using the authors’ language in my interventions resulted in the exclusion of some group members from the conversation. However, thanks to the discussion of critical pedagogy concepts like voice, as elaborated by Freire (1987), Pennycook (2001) (as quoted in

Becerra, 2005), or by Hooks (2010), and also thanks to self and peer-evaluations, I began to question this position I used to take. I started to see more clearly how my understanding of theory was so limited to abstract concepts and that this fact limited the possibilities I had to apply these concepts to real life situations. The awareness I developed from this experience led me to better appreciate my study group mates as peers who provided me with practical knowledge I may lack. This is why I came to prefer starting by a collective construction of meaning with my colleagues and then, only when we established a common ground, I started to introduce the authors’ concepts in the discussion. In this sense, my realization of the interdependence that exists among colleagues to develop conceptual clarity has convinced me that the theoretical, text-based knowledge I so highly praised in my past academic experiences needs empirical evidence to come to life.

In the previous excerpt, Santiago recognizes again his initial reliance only on theory as presented in the texts and how he moved from staying at this individual level of comprehension to trying strategies to negotiate meaning with his peers. He found in the interaction with colleagues the opportunity to contextualize theory and therefore develop greater conceptual clarity. More importantly, he explains that theory motivated his change of attitude, which also happened in Nadia’s case, as we can find in the following excerpt.

**Nadia: Finding relevance in our contributions to discussions.** Reading about critical pedagogy made me more aware of situations of discrimination, oppression, and domination; thus, I have become more confident of ideas that previously were mere intuition. From that process of awareness, I started noticing certain attitudes in me. I realized that I expressed questions and ideas related to readings more often, even when my discourses were not as elaborated as the others’.

Critical pedagogy helped me get used to the idea that all of us contribute to the learning process. Though we knew that there were power relations in the group, we were able to communicate and work collaboratively, or give suggestions to one another in

spite of our statuses. However, I did not often share examples of my own teaching practice to the group. The writing of these narratives helped me realize that it is much more what I have kept (referring to teaching experiences) than what I have shared. I used to think that my experiences were my own and not necessarily sources of examples to understand theory. Now I know that it is not about boasting of what I have done, but about sharing, reflecting, and growing together. Critical pedagogy helped me to understand that my ideas are as valid as others' and that my feelings and experiences in the teaching practicum should be expressed because they count.

Like Santiago, Nadia recognizes the contribution of critical pedagogy theory to her change of attitude. However, while in Santiago's case theory helped him add greater value to his colleagues' contributions, theory helped Nadia to better appreciate her own knowledge gained through experience, thus enabling her to participate more often. Nadia, as other group colleagues, showed concern for a lack of sophistication in her discourse, especially if compared to Santiago's; this issue created certain dynamics of power that influenced participation in group discussions. But critical pedagogy literature encouraged Nadia and other group participants to challenge their fear to participate.

In the following excerpt Patricia, the study group leader, discusses how she dealt with power dynamics in an effort to foster a positive and collaborative learning environment.

*Patricia: Negotiating authority.* As the study group leader, I tried to foster a process of negotiation of meaning about theory among group members along with a process of self-reflection and self-knowledge. To achieve this required an environment of trust where we felt that it was ok to expose our ignorance, lack of understanding, or the contradictions we found in ourselves as a result of self-discovery. Creating such an environment took several months but it was essential in the process of collaborative construction of knowledge as group members became more

confident and added value to their own experiences and conceptualizations.

Even though we tried to create an environment where group members felt safe in order to establish a positive relationship with theory, there were times when some of my colleagues did not feel at ease because they felt confused and threatened by the fact that others seemed to understand or know more which generated conflict in the group and affected participants' self-esteem. As a collective, we also realized that confrontation in this space we shared was necessary at times to gain a better understanding of theory and ourselves.

Our inquiry group became a site to consciously and constantly negotiate power as we learned about critical pedagogy. This exercise of balancing power and authority implied a great effort for me in two ways: One, as I often reminded myself of not falling into the contradiction of imposing my views on others while advocating for democracy; and two, motivating the group to become less dependent of me and take initiative, especially when I was not there or when I did not express my opinions. To contrast the effects of the power dynamics we created, we constantly engaged in the exercise of reflecting on our different positions in the group and their effect on our learning.

Like her colleagues, Patricia refers in her narrative to the centrality of power in the group dynamics. She also explains that critical pedagogy helped group participants become more aware of their own fears and possibilities. Something that she adds in relation to power dynamics and collaborative learning is that even though the group strived for a positive learning environment, conflict and confrontation were also part of their experience and that these were used to create learning opportunities.

In conclusion, peer collaboration was needed in our learning process to facilitate our making sense of theory, as evidenced in the previous excerpts. However, learning as a collaborative construction did not occur without conflict. As explained

in the narratives, the ways we positioned ourselves in the group or how we were positioned by others generated power relations that affected the dynamics of our learning process as individuals and as a group. For example, greater power was given to someone according to educational attainment levels, experience, knowledge, and so forth, which in turn helped us create ideas about self-efficacy and learner identity.

Fortunately, critical pedagogy helped us to uncover the effects of power relations in our performance, attitudes, and learning, as posited by Santiago and Nadia. Being able to name how we positioned ourselves or were positioned by others was necessary, as Patricia suggests in her narrative, to challenge these power dynamics to facilitate learning and to create a positive environment. The strategy we used to overcome harmful power dynamics was to constantly characterize, reflect upon, and interrogate our positioning within the group.

## Conclusions

In this article we offer a glimpse into one of the issues we faced while participating in a study group on critical pedagogy: How we tried to make sense about theory. This issue became relevant because we found that in order to visualize possibilities for incorporating critical pedagogy and arrive at better informed pedagogical practices, developing conceptual clarity and understanding of theory is fundamental. Developing this clarity was a very complex process given the sophistication of the language in some texts on critical pedagogy, and the reduced number of local publications on the topic, among other reasons.

In this study group's experience of sense-making we identified two different but interdependent stages: an individual process of understanding the readings using comprehension activities and a col-

laborative process of learning with and from peers. These two stages are interdependent because, as Johnson (1996) explains, theory alone cannot "fully and completely inform practice. [Theory] can inform practice only to the extent to which teachers themselves make sense of that theory" (p. 766), which may be more likely to happen if they learn theory in relation to their practice and in collaboration with others, as suggested by sociocultural perspectives on learning.

Following Leont'ev and Vygotsky, Johnson and Golombek (2003) explain that cognitive development occurs in the movement from social mediation to internal mediation, that is, internalization. In the experience of the study group, we assumed the internalization of theory as an inward-outward-inward process through which we individually tried to understand theory based on our background knowledge, experience, and so forth, and eventually share, compare, and negotiate individual understandings with others, thus collaboratively constructing knowledge and internalizing the theory we explored. Collaboration in the context of the study group facilitated the learning of the critical pedagogy theory; similarly, this theoretical support provided us with a language to name what occurred in our practices and the opportunity to visualize alternative pedagogical actions in language education, as stated by Johnson and Golombek.

Even though our experience in the study group confirms that teachers' learning of theory was possible with special thanks to our mutual support and collaborative construction of meaning, it is important to remark that the group constituted both a mediational space and a space of conflict and confrontation. Our individual differences, along with the way we positioned or were positioned in the group, generated power dynamics that either fostered or hindered collaborative learning. We argue

that group participants should acknowledge such dynamics of power not just to challenge them and facilitate learning, but as a strategy for personal and professional growth.

With this paper we attempted to use our voices (narrative excerpts) to explain how teachers from different backgrounds make meaning about theory and practice collaboratively. We want to call the readers' attention to the importance of creating learning spaces for teachers where they try to make sense of theory and practice in order to gain conceptual clarity and eventually develop better informed practices. In our case, clarity has not only helped us become more aware of our pedagogical practices, but also more aware of ourselves—our own beliefs, values, and prejudices, as well as contradictions in our attitudes and actions.

From our experience in the study group we derived some conditions that we find necessary in making sense of theory—to understand, appropriate, and/or interrogate theory individually and working collaboratively with peers.<sup>8</sup>

- Improving our reading habits. The different strategies we used to get a better understanding of what the authors tried to convey in the texts (preparing reading reports, answering reading comprehension questions, preparing discussion questions, and constructing mind maps), not only facilitated our reading but at the same time allowed us to confront our different understandings, assess our own and others' reading quality and, ultimately, to take reading as a very rigorous task.
- Recognizing that understanding theory may take some time. It was important for us to be self-critical and recognize that it was possible

not to understand theory right away; that it is not an easy, linear process. Not being able to understand, however, often created feelings of frustration and confusion.

- Creating a positive learning environment. In situations like the one described above, an environment of trust is essential to learning collaboratively, because it may decrease the effects of the anxiety often produced by complex content, and abstract concepts or ideas. It may also boost group participants' confidence in exposing their fears, ideas, biases, or lack of understanding. In our study group, striving for genuine dialogue and promoting democratic relationships contributed to a positive environment.
- Using our current and past experiences to give context to theory. At times the younger group participants underestimated the importance of sharing their experiences and therefore lost opportunities to arrive at a better understanding of theory. Personal experience gains a new meaning when it is examined through the lenses of theory.

Building comprehension of theory and its relation to practice is a process that starts with the individual, but it is when we join others in this task that we confront our understanding with that of others; when we negotiate meaning and put our individual conceptualizations to the test. But learning collaboratively with colleagues is not a process devoid of tensions; based on their personal characteristics, educational attainment levels, teaching experience, and so forth, participants in a study group position themselves or are positioned by others generating power dynamics that influence learning. For this reason, teachers should acknowledge how these dynamics affect them to increase their opportunities for personal and professional growth.

<sup>8</sup> These conditions may apply to similar spaces in a teacher education program or in a teacher development program. These are not precisely derived from the narratives presented here, but from our overall experience in the study group.

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